

EPA's Safe Drinking Water Hotline

Chemical Spill In West Virginia

January 10, 13-14, 2014



1. Background

The West Virginia Department of Environmental Protection estimated 7,500 gallons of 4-methylcyclohexane methanol (MCHM) leaked into the Elk River. The waterway is the source for the locality's water treatment plant, which is just 1.5 miles downstream from the chemical plant.

The Safe Drinking Water Hotline began receiving calls about the WV Chemical MCHM spill on Friday, January 10th, the day after the Governor of WV declared a State of Emergency in nine counties. MCHM is not regulated by the Safe Drinking Water Act. Local water companies were deflecting and referring residents to our hotline as they were getting overwhelmed with calls.

The callers from West Virginia are hearing conflicting reports from all sides of the spectrum consequently, expressing frustration and confusion to OPP Agents on the hotline. On one end, they told our Agents that they had heard that the water is safe if consumed and then on the other end that if consumed may be fatal. Many reports that the callers had heard before calling the hotline were contradictory.

The Safe Drinking Water Hotline is a national hotline with no local, specific information on contaminant levels, etc. To provide the highest level of customer service possible on behalf of EPA, OPP Agents provided callers specific credible outlets for them to find out more information on MCHM. These included their local water company, American Water and the State of WV State of Emergency webpage.

Beginning Friday and continuing through Tuesday, West Virginia American Water has been lifting the water bans by zone, but with no indication on how soon this issue would be resolved. Questions received on Friday were from callers who were panicked and needed information. On Monday, callers began to seek information as to whether or not the ban in their area had been lifted. For questions regarding what bans have been lifted, OPP Agents refer to West Virginia American Water website to provide callers an immediate answer.

Additional guidance on how to respond to the questions below that are specific to MCHM contamination will improve OPP's ability to support callers to the EPA Safe Drinking Water Hotline.

2. Calls and Voicemails

Below is a breakdown of the total calls and voicemails received during the past three business days and then of those calls how many were in relation to the West Virginia spills.

	Friday, Jan 10	Monday, Jan 13	Tuesday, Jan 14
Total Calls	40	37	32
Calls in relation to WV spills	14	10	9
Total Voicemails	11	9	1
VMs in relation to WV Spill	0	0	0

3. Caller Concerns

Some of the questions that have come into the hotline regarding the WV Chemical Spill have been as follows:

- “How is this chemical going to affect my health and my kids’ health?”
- “How do I flush my house properly after the chemical spill when the ban is lifted?”
- “Am I affected by the chemical spill?”
- “How is the chemical spill going to affect my septic system?”
- “What is being done to clean up the chemical spill?”
- “If I boil the water, will that remove the contaminant?”
- “Where can I get clean water?”
- “Can you please provide me updates on whether the ban has been lifted and if we consumed the water if we will be sick?”
- “We were told to not drink, bathe, cook or wash clothes with the tap water, but we have already done that. Will we get sick?”

4. Referrals

Many of the above questions had no clear cut answer since so little information is known about MCHM. The Agents of the Safe Drinking Water Hotline located credible outlets in order to assist callers. They informed all callers that the contaminant was not regulated by the Safe Drinking Water Act but would assist them in getting answers to their questions.

Local Water Company (American Water): Most callers were referred back to their local water company--American Water. American Water posted FAQs and continued to update those FAQs as more information became available. The American Water website also had a map of the counties affected (Fig 1). It was color coded so consequently if your area was red, you still had the no drink ban, if your area was blue, you were now safe to drink the water. This map that the Agents sent to many customers assisted them in knowing when their water was safe. The FAQs were also beneficial to the callers as well. ([FAQs for West Virginia American Water Kanawha Valley Customers](#)) Many callers did not know American Water had this information on their website.

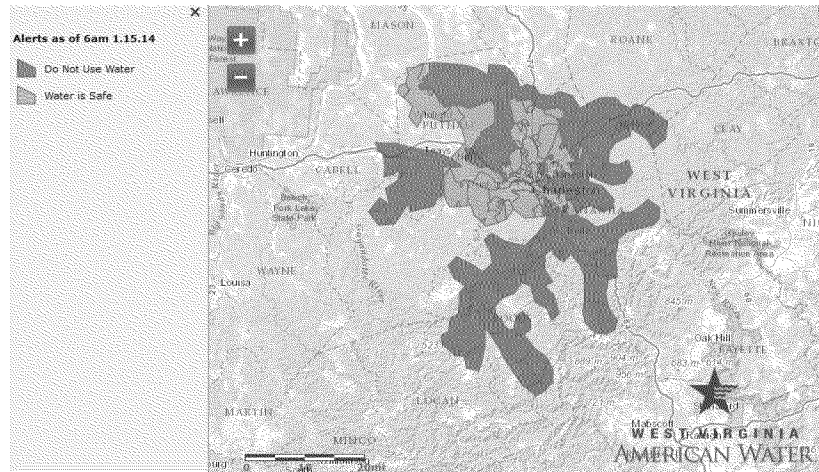


Fig. 1. Screen shot of American Water interactive map to show residents what areas are still under a ban, and what areas are now safe.

There was also a 24/7 temporary hotline created by WV American Water that provides information about whether or not an individual's water ban has been lifted in their particular zone. All other questions were to be answered by the Customer Service Center.

State of WV State of Emergency webpage: Callers who wanted additional information on water distribution centers, locations, updates, and local Emergency Management (by county) phone numbers were directed here. (<http://www.governor.wv.gov/Pages/State-of-Emergency.aspx>)